

Frequently Asked Questions about Syphilis

What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by bacteria. You can get syphilis by having sex with someone who already has syphilis. Syphilis can infect the mouth, genital area, or rectum. It also may get into your body through cuts or broken skin. If untreated, syphilis can infect other parts of your body. Syphilis can be treated and cured with antibiotic drugs.

The symptoms of syphilis can be very mild during the early stages. Later, untreated syphilis can cause serious health problems. People with syphilis are also much more likely to get HIV (the virus that causes AIDS) if exposed to it.

There are four stages of syphilis:

- Primary (first) stage. The first signs (painless sores called *chancres*) of syphilis infection appear. The disease can easily be passed to another person when sores are present. If not treated, the disease continues to the second stage.
- Secondary (second) stage. Signs and symptoms include a skin rash. As in the first stage, the disease can be passed to another person when signs and symptoms are present. If not treated, the disease progresses to the next stage.
- Latent (hidden) stage. The disease is no longer contagious and cannot be passed to another person anymore. Some people with latent syphilis have no further symptoms or problems.
- Tertiary (third) or last stage. Some people with syphilis go on to suffer damage to body organs. They can develop serious complications or die from the disease.

What are the signs of syphilis?

The signs of syphilis change as the disease moves from the early to the late stages. The first sign of syphilis is a chancre on the body. A chancre is a sore or ulcer that does not hurt. It shows up ten days to three months after sex with an infected person.

Chancres can be seen on the part of the body that was exposed to the syphilis bacteria, such as the penis, vagina, *cervix* (opening to the uterus, or womb), tongue, or mouth. Some chancres are inside the body, where they cannot be seen. Chancres last 3 to 6 weeks and heal on their own. If the infection is not treated during this early stage, it moves on to the next stage.

The second stage of syphilis starts with a skin rash that does not itch. The rash may show up as the chancre is fading or up to several weeks later. The rash may appear as rough, reddish-brown spots the size of a penny on the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet. It may also appear elsewhere on the body and be faint or look like another kind of rash. The rash will clear up on its own even without treatment.

Other symptoms may include mild fever, fatigue, headache, sore throat, as well as patchy hair loss, and swollen lymph glands throughout the body.

During these first two stages of syphilis infection, a person can easily pass the disease to sex partners when signs and symptoms are present.

Signs of syphilis include:

- Chancres (painless sores) — the first sign of syphilis.
- Skin rash.
- Mild fever.
- Feeling very tired.
- Headache.
- Sore throat.
- Hair loss.
- Swollen lymph glands throughout the body.

If syphilis remains untreated, the disease progresses to a latent (hidden) stage. Some people will have no further symptoms, even though they still have syphilis. But untreated syphilis can damage body organs, including the brain, nerves, eyes, heart, blood vessels, liver, bones, and joints. This damage may show up many years later as heart disease, mental illness, blindness, or other health problems, and cause death.

How is syphilis spread?

Syphilis bacteria can spread from the sores of an infected person to the genital area, the mouth, or the anus of a sex partner. The bacteria can also pass through broken skin on other parts of the body. Syphilis is rarely, if ever, spread by contact with objects such as toilet seats or towels. An infected pregnant woman can pass the disease to her unborn child. The disease can cause serious mental and physical problems in babies.

The most common way to get syphilis is by having sex with an infected person. Your chances of getting syphilis and other STDs are higher if you have multiple sex partners, have sex with an infected partner, have a history of STDs, and do not use condoms. You can protect yourself from syphilis by not touching sores, body parts where rash appears, and body fluids of a person with syphilis.

How is syphilis diagnosed?

A health care provider can diagnose syphilis by recognizing its signs and symptoms. Lab tests can confirm the diagnosis. Tests to diagnose syphilis include microscopic identification of syphilis bacteria in a sample taken from a chancre and several types of blood tests. Health care providers use a combination of these approaches to detect syphilis and determine the stage of infection. Blood tests are also used to confirm that antibiotics have cured the disease.

Can syphilis be cured? How is syphilis treated?

Syphilis can be cured using penicillin or other antibiotics to kill the bacteria. Usually penicillin is given in a shot, unless the person cannot take penicillin. In all stages of syphilis, proper treatment will cure the disease. But in late syphilis, damage already done to body organs cannot be reversed. You can get syphilis again after being cured if you are exposed to it. Taking antibiotics does not protect you from getting syphilis again.

People who have sex with someone infected with syphilis should be tested and treated, even if they don't have signs of the disease.

Can syphilis cause problems during pregnancy?

Yes. Pregnant women can pass syphilis to their babies during pregnancy and also during childbirth. Some babies with syphilis are stillborn or die soon after birth. Babies born with syphilis may develop skin sores, rashes, fever, *jaundice* (yellow skin), *anemia* (a blood problem), weak crying sounds, and swollen liver and spleen. Testing and treating syphilis early in a pregnant woman is the best way to keep her baby from getting syphilis.

How can I keep from getting syphilis?

There are things you can do to protect yourself from syphilis:

- The best way to prevent syphilis or any STD is to practice abstinence (don't have sex). Delaying having sex for the first time is another way to reduce your chances of getting an STD. Studies show that the younger people are when having sex for the first time, the more likely it is that they will get an STD. The risk of getting an STD also becomes greater over time, as the number of a person's sex partners increases.
- Have a sexual relationship with one partner who doesn't have any STDs, where you are faithful to each other (meaning that you only have sex with each other and no one else).
- Practice "safer sex." This means protecting yourself with a condom EVERY time you have vaginal, anal, or oral sex.

For vaginal sex, use a latex male condom or a female polyurethane condom. For anal sex, use a latex male condom. If needed, use only water based lubricants with male and female condoms. For oral sex, use a *dental dam* – a device used by dentists, made out of a rubbery material, that you place over the opening to the vagina before having oral sex. If you don't have a dental dam, you can cut an unlubricated male condom open and place it over the opening to the vagina.

Even though it may be embarrassing, if you don't know how to use a male or female condom, talk to your health care provider. The biggest reason condoms don't work is because they are not used correctly.

- Be aware that condoms don't provide complete protection against STDs. But, they do decrease your chances of getting an STD. Know also that other methods of birth control, like birth control pills, shots, implants, or diaphragms don't protect you from STDs. If you use one of these methods, be sure to also use a condom every time you have sex.
- Limit your number of sexual partners. Your risk of getting syphilis increases with the number of partners you have.
- Don't douche. Douching removes some of the normal bacteria in the vagina that protects you from infection. This can increase your risk for getting syphilis.
- Learn how to talk with your partner about STDs and using condoms. It's up to you to make sure you are protected. The organizations in the "For more information" at the end of this FAQ have tips for talking with your partner. You can also talk with your health care provider about this.
- When you are sexually active, especially if you have more than one partner, get regular exams for STDs from a health care provider. Many tests for STDs can be done during an exam. And, the earlier an STD is found, the easier it is to treat.
- Learn the common symptoms of syphilis and other STDs. Seek medical help right away if you think you may have syphilis or another STD.

What should I do if I have syphilis?

Sometimes a person may be too scared or embarrassed to ask for information or help. But, keep in mind most STDs are easy to treat. Early treatment of STDs is important. The quicker you seek treatment, the less likely the STD will cause you severe harm. And the sooner you tell your sex partners about having an STD, the less likely they are to spread the disease to others (because they can get treated).

Doctors, local health departments, and STD and family planning clinics have information about STDs. The American Social Health Association (ASHA) has free information and keeps lists of clinics and doctors who provide treatment for STDs. Call ASHA at (800) 227-8922. You can get information from the phone line without leaving your name.

If you have syphilis:

- Get it treated right away. Studies suggest that having an STD increases your risk for getting infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

The National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC)

A Project of the Office on Women's Health in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

- Follow your doctor's orders and finish all the medicine that you are given. Even if the symptoms go away, you still need to finish all of the medicine.
- Avoid having any sexual activity while you are being treated for syphilis.
- Be sure to tell your sexual partners, so they can be treated.
- Be sure to get a follow-up test to make sure that the infection has been cured.

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For more information...

You can find out more about syphilis by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC) at 800-994-WOMAN or the following organizations.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

National Prevention Information Network

Phone Number(s): (800) 458-5231

Internet Address: <http://www.cdcnpin.org>

CDC National STD and AIDS Hotline

Phone Number(s): (800) 227-8922

Internet Address: <http://www.ashastd.org/NSTD/index.html>

National Center for HIV, STD and TB Prevention

Internet Address: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchstp/od/nchstp.html>

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

Phone Number(s): (301) 496-5717

Internet Address: <http://www.niaid.nih.gov>

American Social Health Association

Phone Number(s): (800) 783-9877

Internet Address: <http://www.ashastd.org>

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

Phone Number(s): (800) 762-2264

Internet Address: <http://www.acog.org>

American Academy of Family Physicians

Phone Number(s): (913) 906-6000

Internet Address: <http://www.familydoctor.org>

Planned Parenthood Federation of America

Phone Number(s): (800) 230-7526

Internet Address: <http://www.plannedparenthood.org>

This information was adapted from fact sheets from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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